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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the need for higher education institutions to broaden their conceptions of the talent and experience required of those who assume managerial responsibilities. Colleges and universities are clinging to a parochial set of notions about the job descriptions and skills needed by those who would manage the enterprise of higher education. In the age of markets, accountability, and cost constraints, the motivations and skills of professionals inside the academy differ very little from those in outside settings. Without a real departure from the current practice in higher education, a real gap is likely to develop between the level of managerial skill required in the future and what will actually be available. Higher education, like nearly every other U.S. enterprise, is being recast by an accelerating shift from a producer-driven to a consumer-driven economy. A well-managed institution must focus on service, efficiency, and quality, and it must employ effective managers at every level. Colleges and universities tend to see themselves as entities that differ fundamentally from other organizations, but the reality is that the managerial skills required are very similar to those of other organizations. Institutions of higher education are often ignoring qualified managers because they are outside the academy. (SLD)

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POLICY PERSPECTIVES

The Knight Higher Education Collaborative
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Inside Out

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PERSPECTIVES

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Inside Out

It is at once an innocent and not-so-innocent question: "Who is qualified to manage America's colleges and universities?" What mix of experience, education, training, credentials, aptitudes, and attitudes should institutions seek out when filling their management positions? If you think the question seems purely innocent, then imagine having overheard the following fragment of conversation:

> "You see, I'm not really of the academy. That search committee is never going to give my credentials more than a passing glance."

Now guess the scenario that best fits the speaker's likely identity and circumstances:

a. A research scientist, whose career achievements have occurred primarily in the context of industry, considering the prospect of a chaired professorship at a major university;

b. A senior executive of a successful technology firm, deciding whether to be considered as a candidate for president of a liberal arts college;

c. The director of human resources at a Fortune 500 company, weighing the chance of landing a similar post at a multi-campus state university;

d. A seasoned manager at a public university—with over 20 years of firsthand experience working with budgets, personnel, information technology, capital planning, and government relations—hoping to land a vice-presidential appointment while knowing that he or she lacks an advanced degree in any of those areas.

What worries all four prospective candidates is just how insular, even foreboding, higher education has remained at a time when nearly every other American enterprise has become more open, more engaged, more eager to attract capable professionals who are broadly experienced. If the first three scenarios suggest how hard it is for higher education to accept promising talent not cast in its own mold, the fourth conveys how difficult it can be for managers within the academy to define a meaningful career path.

This essay explores the need for higher education institutions to broaden their conceptions of the talent and experience required of those who assume managerial responsibilities. Just as new knowledge, new technologies, new markets, and new demands for service and accountability are reshaping higher education, colleges and universities are clinging to a parochial set of notions about the job descriptions and skills needed by those who would lead and manage the enterprise. While higher education institutions may rightly consider themselves unique in both form and function, the larger environment in which they operate is increasingly a world without boundaries; in the age of markets, accountability, and cost constraints, the motivations and skills ideally found in professionals inside the academy differ very little from those in other settings. If higher education is coming to understand the need for its senior officers to possess highly developed strategic skills in this more competitive environment, it has yet to acknowledge the importance of fostering these same skills in managers at every level.

The very notion of a *manager* in higher education has traditionally had a pejorative cast: managers are those who oversee functional tasks or execute the designs of their superiors. In the ideal conception of the academy, it is the faculty who serve as keepers and agents of the academic mission. The purpose of managers from the president through the custodial chief is to grease the wheels that make possible the fulfillment of that mission. In the most cynical estimation, even a department chair is simply a manager, tending to administrative details that allow others to do the exciting work. It is this diminution that increasingly places the enterprise at risk. As external changes present colleges and universities with more difficult and unfamiliar challenges, institutions need to attract and retain managers who have both the ability and motivation to be strategic.

We conceive of managers in the most inclusive sense: they are men and women responsible for the effective deployment of resources—whether academic, human, financial, or physical—in a college or university. A manager in this view encompasses every category of professional, ranging from the CEO through the junior-level officer who provides leadership and assumes responsibility for a given unit. At the same time, managers are leaders in their own right. Beyond the oversight of subordinates and attendance to protocol, the effective manager must bring original insight and energy to motivate others in fulfillment of a broader institutional vision. Not surprisingly, the ability of colleges and universities to fulfill their missions increasingly depends on the ability to attract and retain effective managers—men and women who are inventive, entrepreneurial, broadly experienced, and trained in the skills that will allow these institutions to be both mission centered and market smart.

The leadership profile that has become the staple of most presidential searches is now so well honed that the nets are almost never cast beyond an accustomed range.

Hence, the parallel questions that dominated our roundtable convened jointly by the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) and the Knight Collaborative were:

- What kinds of skills do higher education managers need to have—now and in the future?
- What strategies must higher education institutions pursue to produce and retain managers with the skills necessary to be effective?

In addressing these questions, we came to perceive that without a substantial departure from current practice and habits of mind within the academy, a formidable gap will develop between the level of managerial skill required in the future and what is actually at hand within many higher education institutions.

Dilemma of Choice

The dilemma that universities and colleges face in seeking effective managers becomes particularly apparent during the search for a president. When asked to characterize an ideal leader, most search committees would describe someone with the ability to formulate a broad, compelling institutional vision; to develop and sustain successful relationships with a range of constituencies; to build and motivate teams in order to accomplish specific purposes; and to keep a governing board focused on its appropriate role and curtail its tendency to micromanage. The ideal president is an effective advocate and fundraiser as well as a successful broker and problem solver. He or she can see the challenges before an institution in a broad, holistic sense, drawing on the expertise of subordinates without being confined to the terms of their knowledge, and devising solutions that encompass several domains and approaches.

In fact, few of these qualities distinguish a college or university president of today from one of 20 or 30 years ago. The leadership profile that has become the staple of most presidential searches is now so well honed that the nets are almost never cast beyond an accustomed range. As a result, the yield of would-be candidates is drawn almost exclusively from institutions remarkably like the institution conducting the search. Most finalists are from within the academy, most are white males with Ph.D.s, most are already presidents or provosts, and most have carefully constructed resumes denoting successful careers of meeting challenges and avoiding catastrophes. The number of those who enter academic presidencies from for-profit enterprises is very small, and by most accounts their success in office relates directly to their ability to keep a low

profile—to absorb and ultimately mirror an institution's prevailing culture without seeming to disturb it in any substantial way.

Hiring a manager of any kind can easily lead to conflict. In the case of a president, the showdown often occurs between a governing board, whose members seek a strong, decisive leader, and a faculty, whose members seek an accommodating fundraiser who does not meddle with academics. All too often the contest yields a compromise candidate—generally a provost who shows enough academic sensitivity to satisfy faculty and enough trappings of leadership to quiet all but the most vociferous board members.

The same dilemma that surrounds the choosing of a president appears when the institution goes in search of an administrative team. The president sets the tone, often seeking managerial colleagues with similar ambitions and a comfort zone that keeps both the president and the institution on course. In an environment that is rarely conducive to risk taking, the thinking inclines toward a safe and familiar profile and away from candidates who differ in training, expertise, gender, or ethnicity. Job postings that call for an advanced degree plus several years of experience in a college or university are signs that none but the anointed need apply.

If colleges and universities existed in a vacuum—if they continued to hold the virtual monopoly they once enjoyed over the certification of postsecondary learning—there would be no reason to change the prevailing conceptions about the experience and skills that higher education managers should possess. From the chief executive down, the industry might rest assured that the skills sought in its managers could be found and developed entirely within its own culture, often in the form of faculty members who assume administrative roles. Yet the growing realization among trustees, state political leaders, and others concerned with higher education's continued viability is that emerging forces both internal and external will call for different institutional perspectives and strategies. The question every college and university enterprise ought to be asking itself is simply, "What kinds of managers do we need for a world that is anything but predictable? What do we expect those managers to know about yesterday as well as tomorrow? What ought to be their understanding of the interplay between our institution's traditions and its place in the market?"

A Consumer-Driven Economy

To paraphrase an old saw about real estate, what will be of prime importance to colleges and universities in the decade ahead is competition, competition, competition—for faculty, students, public and private funding, and skilled managers. Those who fare best will likely be those enterprises that learn the art of making targeted investments while at the same time mastering the discipline of the market. The fact that almost every college and university experienced real growth

Ten years ago, the thought that alternate suppliers could make any headway in an enterprise dominated by institutions of public purpose was often dismissed as a bad joke. No one is laughing now.

in revenue and student enrollments over the past three decades makes it harder to imagine that the tides could turn. And yet that is the real prospect facing every institution in what is proving to be a maddening scramble for new funds and skilled personnel.

Why? Because higher education, like nearly every other American enterprise, is being recast by an accelerating shift from a producer-driven to a consumer-driven economy. Even a decade ago it was much easier for colleges and universities to behave as if they were the only game in town, safely enjoying a collective monopoly in the delivery of postsecondary education. In the absence of substantial competition from outside the collective, colleges and universities were able to define and control their own curricula, delivery systems, and certification functions simply by making sure that what they proposed was hardly different from what every other institution was proposing.

That monopoly is now giving way as colleges and universities find themselves competing in increasingly disjointed markets for goods and services. The first and most obvious is a student market in which graduate, professional, and continuing education are coming to rival undergraduate education as a primary source of institutional revenue. While we have little doubt that this market will continue to grow, we are not as certain that traditionally configured institutions will be able to sustain their share of that expanding pie. Ten years ago, the thought that alternate suppliers could

make any headway in an enterprise dominated by institutions of public purpose was often dismissed as a bad joke. No one is laughing now. Today alternate suppliers everywhere are preparing to serve a market that is becoming more complex and diversified in terms of students' age, ethnic background, and educational goals. The University of Phoenix is only the most visible of a growing host of for-profit vendors whose prospectuses often include well-financed schemes for marrying face-to-face instruction with distance education delivered through the Internet.

Higher education can no longer count on retaining its best talent solely on the basis of its mission or the prestige of a university or college appointment.

No doubt many of these ventures will fail. On the other hand, the survivors of this Darwinian process will likely be lean, mean, and hungry; they will not likely stand in awe of the traditions or priorities of the academies they seek to supplant. Moreover, the success of these new ventures will likely reshape the student market itself. By its very nature, interactive technology accelerates the expansion of consumer choice, providing new venues for the delivery of higher education and allowing students of every stripe to make new kinds of demands. The next step is to promise a kind of education more closely tailored to consumers' individual goals, in contrast to the broad programs of learning and experience inherent in a traditional baccalaureate or associate degree.

Another of higher education's emerging markets centers on the academy's human assets. In the past one might have safely assumed that competition for the most talented faculty and managers would occur primarily among higher education institutions themselves. The familiar career path—for senior administrators, rising faculty stars, and top-flight managers—would traditionally lead from one institution to another in the pursuit of more resources, greater prestige, higher-powered academics, and presumably greater professional challenge and satisfaction.

Today, however, the most capable faculty and managers are almost as likely to leave higher education altogether for the higher compensation and more open environments of the for-profit world. The ties linking the nation's most entrepreneurial faculty to their institutions are becoming more tenuous as these faculty pursue consulting arrangements and other opportunities for individual advancement, including the sale of lectures in electronic formats through for-profit vendors. Higher education can no longer count on retaining its best talent solely on the basis of its mission or the prestige of a university or college appointment.

As they shift from producer- to consumer-driven economies, most colleges and universities are coming to understand that their competitors no longer look the same. A decade ago, most colleges and universities could operate in a fairly secure knowledge of how their markets worked and what other carts on the square were like. One needed only to look in the mirror to see the face of the competition or to know its values and motivations. The formal and informal associations of institutions, by whatever name, afforded their members a sense of assurance from the fact that each member was essentially alike, however hard it might compete with its peers for students and faculty. In times of duress, these carts even could band together, effectively closing ranks against common assaults or incursions on their kind. What is different today is that the carts are no longer all the same. It is possible for an institution to carry out its traditional functions and fulfill its historical mission—only to be blown off the square by competition of new and different sorts.

Managing Well

Together these changes yield a pronounced acceleration of forces that are making higher education institutions more complex, more vulnerable, and hence more difficult to manage. Does managing well mean serving people's needs or making the bottom line? We believe it means both. While colleges and universities do not posit the making of money as a primary goal, they cannot accomplish their missions of teaching, research, and service without attending to their budgets and weighing competing claims on their resources. Higher education does not have shareholders, though it does have stakeholders, and the qualities of management needed to satisfy these two constituencies are not really different.

A well-managed institution, in our view, is one that focuses on service, efficiency, and quality as

primary values. It understands that, in addition to being values in their own right, these qualities provide an institution with a strategic advantage in the competition for students and ultimately for revenue. In recent years the conception of service has expanded considerably, as universities and colleges undertake a range of functions rivaling that of a municipality. The impetus for effective management is the awareness that a college or university cannot expect to maintain its competitive edge in the complacent role of an institution dependent on continued support from philanthropy, government agencies, and a stable, largely uncontested market for students and research revenue.

In higher education, as in any other industry, a well-managed enterprise is necessarily one that employs effective managers at every level—men and women who can look over the horizon, gauging the changes likely to reshape the enterprise as a whole as well as those more limited shifts that impact the manager's specific roles and responsibilities. Leaders in a well-managed institution have the ability not just to generate good ideas but also to translate them into strategies for effective actions. Part of a manager's motivation is the prospect of professional recognition and advancement within the enterprise. Managers in a strategic organization hold themselves accountable for quality and performance outcomes; at the same time, they are given sufficient authority over staff and budget to take risks and act decisively. Managers in such an organization are more accountable, even as they are accorded greater flexibility in helping to achieve an institutional vision.

In addition, professionals within a well-managed organization are capable of working with one another as team players. The effective manager looks to his or her own team as a critically important unit for accomplishing a range of complex tasks. As leader of a team, the manager thinks continually about the array of skills individual members bring to the challenges the team faces as a whole. What skills and expertise are missing? Who is likely to be leaving the circle in the months ahead? Who could add a dimension that the team currently lacks in terms of background and perspective? An effective manager must consider the composition and effectiveness of the team, not only at the top ranks, but also two and three levels down. If an organization lacks integrity and resolve at the lower levels, the strategies conceived in the higher ranks will likely fall to the floor.

Strait is the Gate

This portrait of the strategic institution as a well-managed organization helps to cast our central point in sharper relief: a strategic university or college is one that requires effective managers throughout the institution. Defined in this way, the managerial skills that colleges and universities require differ very little from those sought by nearly every other enterprise. Increasingly there is a need for managers who can adapt readily to changing circumstances, who can absorb and apply essential concepts from other domains, and who feel engaged and challenged by new kinds of problems and opportunities.

The problem, baldly put, is that most colleges and universities see themselves as entities of a fundamentally different kind. Despite the basic sameness of the challenges faced, most colleges and universities

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remain fixed in a conception of themselves as unique and somehow beyond the considerations that guide other enterprises in terms of how they organize themselves and select their managers. Rather than asking how professionals with experience in other settings might contribute to higher education's mission, most institutions instinctively confine the search for talent to the familiar fold.

The result is that too many capable managers never receive serious consideration at a college or university where they could make substantial contributions. Even those outsiders who survive a selection process are likely to develop misgivings when they encounter the creature's inward workings. The cultural environment of many institutions is so entwined with the existing order that it simply wears down any initiative a newcomer might bring. Many of these professionals return to industry or other avenues they find to be more rewarding, not just in terms of salary but in the deeper sense of fulfillment that comes from making a real impact and gaining recognition for the contributions one has made.

Higher education's sense of uniqueness often yields very particular ideas of what constitutes acceptable credentials in a manager. Those who have worked

in a two-year college, for example, will recognize the power of sector discrimination, which all but precludes their being seriously considered by a four-year institution. The hiring committees of larger universities convince themselves that no person experienced in managing a small college could possibly understand the grander scale of issues within a university. And woe betide the manager whose professional experience has taken place outside the realm of higher education; having set foot in corporate America is very often cause for summary dismissal by a college or university search committee.

Many of those accustomed to corporate rhythms sense the weight of inertia stacked against them, not only in the hiring process but in the deeper machinations of the academic culture. Imbedded within this culture is a sentiment that would reject "the corporate model" as altogether inappropriate to the functioning of a university or college. Higher education in this view is not about the bottom line; colleges and universities are not seeking to maximize profit but rather the quality of the education they provide and research they produce. Important decisions are reached and carried out not by top-down executive orders but through broad collegial deliberation; the essence of a higher education institution is not management but governance.

No manager can hope to succeed in a college or university without subscribing to this ideal of the academic institution. At the same time, most managers understand that, unless they are given genuine discretion to carry out their tasks, it becomes impossible to maintain such an ideal in real life. The very weight of deliberation that an institution must invest in its decisions becomes a source of frustration for many effective managers, particularly when collegial debate masks a deeper cultural reluctance to reach decisions about fundamental matters.

Through the past quarter century, the broad deliberative process that was initially used only for the appointment of faculty or chief executives has come to be employed in the hiring of managers of all kinds. The original drivers of this expanded process were the affirmative action mandates that forced the academy to look beyond the accustomed pool of candidates for professional staff as well as faculty. The goal in the 1970s was to reach beyond the old-boy networks by purposefully developing applicant pools characterized by diversity of background as well as talent, thus helping to ensure that the person chosen for a position was in fact the most qualified to meet the tasks envisioned.

Ironically, the very process most institutions used to achieve diverse applicant pools became a constrictor in its own right, effectively narrowing the portal in a quite unexpected way. The ten- to twenty-person search committee became the coin of the realm, not just for faculty but for managerial positions of every kind. The unwieldy size and composition of such a committee, the contention among its factions, the latent political agendas and personality clashes all have the effect of narrowing the pool of candidates, excluding some on ideological grounds and driving away others as somehow being at odds with the ethos of the academy. All too often what remains are the candidates found to be least objectionable to the majority of committee members. The larger result is a managerial talent pool that is neither deep nor broad nor skilled enough.

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Outsourcing and Its Impacts

Studies of management in other industries have shown that, as the supply of managerial talent fails to keep pace with the demand for such skills, a given organization may draw increasingly on the expertise of external consultants to fill the gap. The same phenomenon will likely occur within colleges and universities that continue to define narrowly the pools from which they are willing to recruit their managers. As these institutions encounter a widening gap between the level of talent required and the level of talent available in house, they begin drawing on talent from without to accomplish tasks ranging from bookstore and dining operations to financial analysis and strategic planning. Outsourcing thus becomes a natural step for meeting immediate needs while achieving heightened efficiency and cost savings. That much is well understood

and, in many quarters, feared. What is not understood is how an over-reliance on outsourcing actually allows an institution to avoid the redefining of managerial tasks and qualifications it needs to attract the talent it requires. By outsourcing a strategic decision, an institution may succeed in averting risk, but it also forgoes the opportunities for learning and transformation that accompany the taking of risks.

The bottom line? Imagine a university or college committed to business as usual in the face of external pressures that are permeating the institution at an accelerating pace. Hiring committees become caricatures of the deliberative process they are supposed to embody, subjecting every issue to tedious scrutiny and debate that yields only compromise appointments. Frustrated by the shortage of appropriate skills in their units, senior managers seek outside expertise to help them accomplish a growing share of the practical tasks they confront. Mid-level managers come to feel alienated and stultified in their careers, as a growing share of the most fulfilling work passes beyond them to external consultants. With more of the managerial functions and decisions taking place outside the institution, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain an environment that allows an institution to feel effective in its mission or exhibit a sense of pride in its own identity. Members of the faculty come to feel that, in a basic sense, the institution is no longer their own as the system of services supporting their work falls to a changing array of outsiders.

A Better Prospect

The antidote? A better-managed institution with a significant number of senior managers who, precisely because they have broad experience both within and beyond the academy, know what it means to be both mission centered and market smart. It is an institution with the capacity to make strategic decisions in keeping with its core values and market opportunities—decisions that allow it to enhance its distinctive strengths in the face of new and growing competition. The fundamental step in building that capacity is the reconceptualization of both the skills required of higher education managers and the kinds of experiences that qualify managers for the responsibilities they will assume.

Averting a skills gap in the future will require changes in the cultures and ultimately in the practices of many higher education institutions and their managers. A key step in this transformation is to redefine the role of managers and the work they perform. What is needed is an environment that encourages managers to be strategic by providing incentives and defining career paths that can attract and retain talented people. The steps are necessarily more easily defined than taken:

- Develop purposeful strategies for attracting and retaining skilled managers, including those whose training and background fall outside of the traditional box. What will be increasingly required are transferable skills acquired through a broad range of experiences.
- Once recruited, accord managers a license to take risks and reward those whose successful innovations advance institutional goals.
- Rethink internal career paths—trap no one, but at the same time hold every manager truly accountable for the meeting of institutional goals.
- Go ahead and outsource—but do so carefully, remembering that as more of the important and rewarding work takes place outside a given organization it becomes a fundamentally less interesting place for creative people to work.
- Remember as well that outsourcing in itself is seldom a successful solution to a managerial problem, and that in some cases it simply puts off the task of redefining the kinds of managerial talent and experience required in an institution's own setting.
- Keep separate the functions of management and processes of academic governance—what works for faculty does not necessarily work for either managers or staff. It is long past time to end higher education's fascination with administrative search committees often dominated by constituent interests.

When colleges and universities consider the horizon in terms of their traditional functions, there appears to be little sense of disjunction between past and future. Yet the challenge of educating a population that has grown larger, more complex, and more diverse calls for greater flexibility and a willingness to move

beyond tradition. One can think of higher education's increased permeability in fatalistic terms—as the *Titanic*'s encounter with the iceberg that brings the undoing of everything, the end of higher education as it has traditionally existed. Or one can consider the infusion of new subject matter, new markets, and new conceptions of higher education as being a source of vitality, stirring the academy to engage its distinctive strengths with a society that is itself in a state of flux

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and evolution. Ultimately, it is the cross-fertilization, the brushings between academy and society, that will generate productive energy in both settings. The fact of permeability prevents colleges and universities from becoming wholly absorbed in an insular mindset bearing little relationship to society's needs or ambitions.

Permeability must ultimately change the academy's traditional order, and we believe these permutations ultimately benefit both colleges and universities and the larger society of which they are a part. One sign of hopeful progress toward a new mindset would be to hear a fragment of conversation in a hallway in which a seasoned manager reflects: "I consider myself very much *of* the academy, even though in my current capacity I am not really *in* it. I spent part of my early career in a college, then went to work for a service firm. In the course of my career, I could very well return to a college or university again!"

10

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